



TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Whit Ayres
DATE: August 1, 2011
RE: Putting Presidential Primary Polling in Perspective

Many recent press stories about the 2012 Republican presidential primary nominating contest have been filled with polling data, much of it misleading or even irrelevant to the actual race for the nomination. Before a nominee is crowned or a candidate buried six months before a single vote is cast, we thought it would be helpful to put some of the recent polling in perspective.

1) In 2007 national polls of Republican primary voters were utterly useless in predicting the ultimate 2008 nominee or even the serious contenders. That is because the nominating battle is not a national contest, but rather a series of sequential statewide races. Polling at this time in 2007 informed us that the likely 2008 Republican nominee would be . . . Rudy Giuliani. The man most likely to give him a run for his money was . . . Fred Thompson. Mike Huckabee, the ultimate winner of the Iowa caucuses and the last challenger to leave the race, was "mired" in the low single digits at two percent.

August 2007 Gallup Survey of National Republican Primary Voters

Rudy Giuliani	30 percent
Fred Thompson	19 percent
John McCain	14 percent
Newt Gingrich	10 percent
Mitt Romney	6 percent
Mike Huckabee	2 percent

National poll results are driven by the candidates' name recognition or notoriety. They often do nothing more than identify the current "flavor of the month," showing leads for people who may never win a single primary, or even enter the race. Jon Huntsman is exactly where we expected him to be in national surveys three months after he returned to the United States to begin a Presidential campaign.

2) Candidates' poll numbers in the early primary states are unlikely to move until paid media campaigns begin in earnest. The campaign is currently being fought off of the national stage, and that will continue for months as candidates make their case to voters in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida. The impact of these efforts will be seen in endorsements, earned media, and fundraising, but the poll numbers will not start to move until the candidates are on television and radio for extended periods of time. Indeed, while the credible candidates will gain stature and momentum throughout the campaign, the poll numbers will be the *last* thing to move.

3) Governor Jon Huntsman's service as Ambassador to China is a positive, not a negative, among Republican primary voters. In surveys of likely Republican primary voters in New Hampshire and Florida, we posed the following question:

Which of the following statements comes closer to your view (ROTATE):

a) Jon Huntsman's service as Barack Obama's Ambassador to China and his complimentary notes to Obama show that he is not a real Republican. As Ambassador, he was a loyal member of the Obama team. His close relationship with and past support of Obama would make him an ineffective candidate in the general election and shows he can't be trusted to promote a conservative agenda.

b) Jon Huntsman's service as America's Ambassador to China was a patriotic duty in service to his country. Like General David Petraeus and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Huntsman served a Democratic president for the good of his country, just as he served President Reagan and both President Bushes. His foreign policy experience and expertise in Asia would be significant assets in the general election and the presidency.

In New Hampshire, likely Republican primary voters prefer the "service to country" argument over the "not a real Republican" argument by 62 to 23 percent. Likely Republican primary voters in Florida agree by 55 to 27 percent.

4) The overwhelming majority of Republican primary voters in early states have not firmly decided on a candidate. While many Republican primary voters tell pollsters that they currently support a particular candidate, very few have made a firm decision at this stage. In New Hampshire, 79 percent of voters who currently support a candidate say that they are open to supporting someone else, compared to 81 percent in Florida.

The current Republican primary contest for the 2012 nomination is the most wide open in my professional lifetime. Consumers of political polling data would be wise to avoid placing too much stock in the predictive power of polling at this stage of the campaign, or in believing premature obituaries for campaigns just getting under way.